

Three figures stood there. Three of them.

The rickety archway Wilson and Maxwell had built had been replaced with a much nicer and more intricate one via arcane means, and now three people- three. Three of them. Three. The most hideous trick of all had been played on him.

He had built that thing to escape... and instead, this world had used it to pull innocent souls into this hell.

Wilson could not move, could not speak. The thing that broke his trance was the sound of fleeing footsteps. Maxwell was running away. Wilson turned to his vanishing image. "Hey!"

Maxwell continued to run, and Wilson stood rooted to the ground, stupidly unable to recall that he was also capable of running, flooded with the magnitude of what he had done and the blood on his hands. "Hey!" he screeched. "Get back here! You- you tricked me!"

Maxwell did not return. Maxwell was long gone. Wilson turned his head, and those three poor souls were still there.

One of them was massive. Scarred, and wearing a pelt, likely from something that he'd killed himself. He looked in Wilson's direction with keen interest. This was the man Maxwell had been running from, if he hadn't been running from Wilson. A fellow like that could sling Wilson over his shoulder and keep him there effortlessly, while he screamed and kicked and beat his tiny fists like gnats on the man's broad back, and cried to deaf ears that it was all a mistake...

Now he wanted to run too. There were two things that just barely kept him from doing so. Firstly, Maxwell had run, and Wilson did not want to be like him at all. Secondly, there was a child over there.

The behemoth in the pelt, well, he could probably survive out here just fine and there was no point getting murdered trying to give him unwanted assistance. But next to him stood a pale, wistful little girl, who didn't even measure up to his elbow.

Wilson marched forward.

The man in the pelts began to bellow: "Hello!" He sounded amused, at least, not angry. Why he should be amused at suddenly being in the middle of a forest was anyone's guess. "I am Mighty Wolfgang! Is good to see little peoples!" The large man, apparently the Mighty Wolfgang, turned to the third of the figures that had appeared out of thin air- a springy man wearing mime getup, must've been yanked right off the street- and shook his hand vigorously.

That mime fellow looked oddly familiar. Wilson would have stopped to think about it- thinking about things was after all his life's calling, it was what he liked best, and he was good at it!- but that would have broken his momentum and he would have started to think about how little he desired to approach the Mighty Wolfgang.

Instead, he continued until he was very close to the group, and then he stopped and said: "Good day to you all!"

He was unused to considering how his voice might sound to other people. It sounded rough and crackly, and it squeaked at random.

He was formulating a reassuring speech, directed mostly at the kid- how this was an accident, a horrible accident, and now that they were here he would guide and help them, and all of that! He was no Maxwell! But before he could say a word-

"Is good!" The Mighty Wolfgang had a mighty handshake. He pumped Wilson's arm so hard that his teeth rattled. "I am the Mighty Wolfgang!"

"Oh are you?" Wilson babbled. "I'm the Not-so-mighty Wilson. And I'm really sorr-"

"For long time, Wolfgang fights monsters in wilderness and has no friends. Today, Wolfgang makes friends!" The Mighty Wolfgang gestured expansively at the three people present who were not The Mighty Wolfgang. "And now I am happy! I am not alone!"

"Ah, well-" Wilson paused and looked about at the others. "I- I beg your pardon? You were already here?"

Wolfgang nodded and closed his eyes in manly sorrow. "Have been alone long time. Is not good."

Wilson looked at the other two, the mime, whose dark eyes sparkled brightly, and the little girl, who was drawn and weary.

"Have you," Wilson said, beginning to formulate a dark suspicion- "have you also, by any chance, been here a while?"

The mime nodded.

"An eternity," said the little girl.

So Wilson had not been used as an unwitting tool to damn three innocent people to a life in hell. That was good. But the alternative was that these guys had already been in hell for a long time, including the little girl. And that was not good at all. And in addition, Maxwell had known about this, because he was responsible for it, and he had not elected to share...

The girl was watching Wilson with some trepidation. "Who, or what, pray tell, might you be?..."

"Ah," said Wilson. "My name is Wilson Higgsbury. I'm a scientist, and I've been here alone a while myself. Except, of course, Maxwell was here..." His tone was somewhat

brusque, because internally, he was building up a really severe case of cold, murderous rage. "He's here now, you know. He ran away when he saw you."

"Ha! Twig man is always run away. Knows he cannot fight Wolfgang!"

Wilson glanced over the bulging biceps. "Neither could I, to be perfectly honest." He looked back at the little girl. She was well-spoken and knew words like 'eternity', so she was probably old enough to keep up if he talked to her like a regular person, right? "And Maxwell took you here too, did he?" He knew the answer, of course. He eyed the child's slender, delicate wrists... the blisters and calluses on her baby hands...

"Indeed... me and my sister."

"Sister?" Another child?! "Where is she?"

The little girl took a flower out of her pocket to show him.

"A-ah," said Wilson. A powerful dark energy rolled off of that flower like fumes.

He sort of doubted that the little girl had a sister who was a flower. She'd probably gone mad with loneliness and taken a cursed flower as a companion. Since something was markedly wrong with it, he should try to get her to give it up- but not right away, of course. She'd been through a great deal and he ought to humor her for now. "Hello, er... what are your names?" he asked.

"I'm Wendy. This is Abigail."

Wolfgang was watching from over Wilson's shoulder, and for a gigantic ursa-major of a man, he looked awfully unsettled. "H-hello, tiny Wendy!"

"Hello, Mighty Wolfgang," she said impassively.

Wilson turned to the last member of the group, the mime. A lanky fellow, with an upturned nose and a wistful expression. "And you... I believe I've come across you before, haven't I?"

The mime nodded and made an expansive gesture with his hands. Wilson could recognize him, now that he'd been given the hint that all of these people had already been in the world. The mime had been trapped by Maxwell's mechanical monstrosities in the challenge worlds, and had vanished into smoke when freed. Wilson had thought he was another shadow, but here he was back again.

Come to think of it, could Wilson really be quite certain these people weren't all shadows? Had anything ever turned out to be real in this place, ever? Apart from pain? Pain was very real.

This just seemed a bit odd. Maxwell tricking him into building a portal that brought in more people made a lot of sense. Maxwell tricking him into building a portal that brought in more people who had already been present made a little less sense. And he didn't know how this could have happened accidentally.

"Tiny clown is funny," Wolfgang said.

Wilson looked over the group. "Hmmm." He was assuming this was Maxwell's doing, but another force had clearly remade the portal after its completion. Perhaps he did not have all the variables...

If these people were all shadows, there wasn't much he could do about it. But they seemed very real. He couldn't trust anything in this place, but they seemed real. He wanted them to be real.

Even if that meant a little girl had been trapped in this place until she went mad and thought a flower was her sister, which was a despicable thing to want to be true! Ah, well, he was a scientist, not a saint.

"Come on, I'll show you all my camp," he said.

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They'd built the archway within a reasonable distance from camp, close enough to be convenient but far enough so that anything attacking them at the building site hopefully wouldn't follow them to camp or vice versa. Anyway, it wasn't a long walk.

On the way he noticed Wendy lagging behind and looking at him watchfully. Why, he realized, if he were suspicious of them, how much more must they have cause to be suspicious of him? If he could take them at their word, they had all witnessed most of the same horrors he had-

-they couldn't have freed Maxwell or met the shadow woman, could they? Perhaps they could. Perhaps those had been tricks, and everyone here had witnessed them in common-

-but anyway, here was Wilson, a stranger, who had quite suspiciously already been present in a world they'd all been dropped into. So of course the child must be nervous about him. He was slightly anxious about her, and he was a grown man with her advantage in size and strength. She must be terrified.

"So," he asked her, "how are you?"

"Wretched."

"Oh... perhaps a hot meal will help. I've got food at camp."

"Good!" Wolfgang boomed. "Wolfgang will make good meal for new friends!" He clapped Wilson on the back with one hand, the mime with the other. "Make tiny men strong!"

Wilson was a little lost for words. It had been a long time since he'd felt an actual human touch. Wolfgang seemed very solid and genuine... he'd also knocked the air quite out of Wilson's lungs, and he didn't fully recover it until structures appeared on the horizon.

"Ah," he said. "That's- that's my camp."

The science machine, fire pit, single chest, and crock pot had seemed adequate when it had been only Wilson and Maxwell. More than Maxwell deserved, actually. Now it seemed quite incomplete.

Wolfgang stepped forward and looked about the place. "Fancy camp!" he pronounced. "Where is foods?"

"In the box," Wilson mumbled. "Take anything here that you need. I can get more." He'd always thought this place had too many resources for one man anyway.

He studied his firewood stash, and took out four logs, one big, two medium, one small. He arranged them around the firepit for seating and plunked himself down on one of the medium logs. The mime did likewise.

Wilson eyed him. "So, are you unable to speak or just shy?"

The mime made a key-locking gesture at his mouth. Either he couldn't speak or he wasn't going to.

"I see. I've got writing materials in the box too if you need to write anything."

Wendy had perched on her small log and watched him with wide, glazed eyes. She put one in mind of a porcelain doll. A breakable, smashable, shatterable porcelain doll, in a world of creatures that liked to smash things.

Wilson had cause for the first time in quite a while to think about what he must look like to other people. He knew he had a rather sharp face, and had been told that he had a habit of squinting suspiciously- he'd been accused of this being an annoying affectation, and he let it stand because he did not like to admit that he was slightly nearsighted but not enough to want to wear glasses. He let his hair grow longer than most men did, as he thought it was very nice hair, to be quite honest- jet-black and wavy, and it tended to defy gravity. It was quite striking, really- and had the benefit of drawing the attention upwards to his dark, intelligent eyes and slender, slightly aquiline nose, and away from the underbite that tended to give him the mien of a spoiled child rather than an intellectual man of science.

He had not had the opportunity to wash or brush his hair in quite some time, though, and when he didn't look after it it got to be kind of... unruly. In his mother's words, he started to look like a little madman. Oh, and he'd been growing out his beard, since winter was coming and it was warmer that way. Some men looked quite mature and sophisticated with a beard. Wilson did not.

Also he had big horsey teeth and looked perpetually exhausted and his voice was too loud and harsh and his skin was the color of maggots, but he could do something about the beard.

It looked as if Wolfgang had taken what he wanted from the chest. Wilson retrieved his razor, such as it was, and quickly disposed of his two-week beard. He retook his seat at

the fire and realized that the mime and Wendy were still watching him, and had likely watched him shave, and it was weird to just shave in front of people. He was too used to doing whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. Maxwell had been hanging around for the past week or so, but Wilson didn't care what that guy thought in the slightest so that didn't count.

Wilson cleared his throat and rubbed his hands together.

He had attended college alongside a tall, ginger cousin who had always somehow known how to brush aside Wilson's awkwardness with a breezy statement in group conversation. How'd he done it? Ah- subject change? "Have either of you cheated death yet?"

The mime tilted his head.

"Sadly yes," said Wendy.

"Ah... that must have been scary for you." He recalled that not all topics were appropriate for school-age children. Another subject change, perhaps?

As he was fumbling for another topic, she spoke first. "You bleed."

Her eyes looked lively and interested for the first time, and were fixed at the level of his chin.

"Er?"

The mime stroked the underside of his jaw, the way one might point out the smudge of pudding on someone else's lip by indicating the location on one's own face.

Wilson touched underneath his chin and came away with red fingers. He'd cut himself shaving. "Oh! Don't worry about that, Wendy, I just slipped with the razor. It's only a rock on a stick, you see..."

"Ah... and our skin is so thin and soft..."

Wolfgang was casting little anxious glances at her from where he was working on the food.

"Softer than a rock, anyway," Wilson said.

"It is easy to bleed," said Wendy in her quiet little voice. "And so much harder to stop."

Wilson raised an eyebrow and examined the cut gingerly with his fingers. It already felt sticky. "Actually, both of those are automatical processes that happen by themselves! I think this has clotted over already."

"How prosaic you are."

Hmm! It appeared that poor young Wendy had reacted to her morbid circumstances by developing a morbid personality. A fragile young thing in a harsh world, the law of effect had selected in her a sort of fatalism. Interesting! And also, very sad.

Wilson absent-mindedly began to lick the blood off his fingers. The metallic taste was oh-so familiar, one of the few things that remained constant in this ridiculous ever-shifting world...

He remembered, again, that he couldn't just do whatever he wanted in front of people. Wendy seemed to think that licking up your own blood was normal behavior but the mime looked awfully concerned.

Wilson wiped his hand on his pants like a normal person.

Wolfgang entered then, setting a plate of meatballs in Wilson's lap. "Eat meats," Wolfgang said firmly. "Not bloods. Is gross."

"Okay," Wilson said, dropping his gaze to his lap. Wolfgang passed out food to the others and sat down in his assigned place, looking as comfortable as if he'd lived in this camp for years.

In some ways it would have been nice to be more like Wolfgang.

The food was piping hot and smelled good. Wilson poked at it. The last time someone had cooked for him had been... Maxwell. Yesterday. As a half-hearted quasi-apology. So much had happened since then so quickly. Who was this giant man who had appeared from nowhere and immediately made them all a gift of food?

"Eat!" Wolfgang commanded. Wilson began to eat. Wolfgang was a much better cook than himself, and Wilson forgot to ponder anything until all the meatballs were gone.

Wendy and the mime were still eating. Wolfgang and Wilson had finished, and now would just, er... stare awkwardly at each other? That was what Wilson was currently doing, anyway.

"Tiny man!" Wolfgang bellowed. "Is good, yes?"

"Yes, thank you!"

"Eat meats and get strong! Then we go, fight! Get more meat! Get more strong!"

Wolfgang flexed his amazing biceps. "Yes!"

"It's an endless cycle," Wilson agreed.

"Tell me more about new friends," the giant urged. "Wolfgang will start. I am from circus! I travel across your country, making ladies faint, and men gaze in awe upon my muscles, and children make oohs and aaahs! I am strongest man in world!"

"Very impressive," Wilson said, glancing over those enormous belts of sternocleidomastoid muscle in the man's neck.

So this fellow's physical prowess not only seemed beyond belief to a malnourished creature who could not but subconsciously compare it to the parade of wasted corpses he'd seen in his lifetime; the Mighty Wolfgang was so indisputably Mighty that he had been paraded as a sideshow exhibit before the public. And that was nothing to sneeze at! One ought to be careful not to get on his bad side- although, thus far, Wilson had seen no sign that Wolfgang had a bad side. Giants could be gentle, after all...

Of course people could unexpectedly turn on you, too...

"What about you, little clown man?" Wolfgang asked the mime.

The mime delicately set down his plate, with crumbs left on it, and stood. He began to do... something with his body, twisting and gesturing. At the end of it Wilson had a clear vision in his mind of a Paris street (Paris being a city he'd never visited in his life), the crowds who gathered to applaud and throw francs in Wes' hat, and- his name was Wes.

He applauded politely, because it felt right. Wes bowed and sat down. The fabric of reality felt a little thinner, and something was glancing impassively at Wilson from the other side.

"An impressive talent," Wendy said.

"Yes... incredible..." Something that ought to be studied...

"What are you from, scary girl?" Wolfgang asked, eyeing her nervously.

"I am no one and nothing," she said.

Wilson lurched forward as if he'd been smacked in the back of the head. "No you're not!"

She looked at him without a trace of emotion. "I have no accomplishments, and no occupation but this mockery of survival... before this place I had nothing better to do than amuse myself. I no longer can find any amusement in anything."

"How old are you, eight?"

"I..."

"What you are," said Wilson, "is a limitless parcel of human potential. You could become anything when you grow up!"

"A wife," she said, "of a poor man or a rich man. Or perhaps a librarian, or a secretary. Or a school-teacher."

"Actually you could be nearly anything, nowadays. There are women scientists! If women can be scientists I'm pretty sure they can do anything."

"And what if I never grow up?"

"You certainly will. I'll make certain you do. You will survive, Wendy... and I'll see you returned safely home to your parents!"

"My mother is dead," she said. "And by now, my father has certainly followed her."

"Oh," he said. "Er, I'm very sorry."

"Death comes for us all."

Wolfgang watched her, biting his fingernails.

Wilson frowned. "Someone will have to adopt you..." This was not the way he'd seen his life going that morning.

"No," said Wendy.

A child as young as her, of course she'd have to be adopted. Even if she was capable of living on her own it would be illegal and irresponsible to let her do so- but that was not a problem for the immediate moment.

"Who," she asked, fixing him with her ice-blue stare, "are you, Wilson?"

"Me? I'm a scientist."

"Is that all you wish to say?..."

He glanced at the others. Bombastic artists and suffering innocent. He reached for his own past.

A sterile, white room; the smell of blood and antiseptic. Bandages. Headstones glowing white under the moon; soft, fresh, wet earth. The sting of a needle in the crook of his elbow. Pitying eyes and hushed tones of voice.

"That's all I wanted to say," he said, shifting in his seat. "I'm, er, just a scientist."

They watched him solemnly. He cleared his throat and got up out of his seat. The sun was beginning to set, and where were they all going to sleep? He didn't have enough grass to make bedrolls for four people.

"I'm going to have to gather some hay while the sun shines," he excused himself.

"Aha!" Wolfgang rose to his feet as well, a pile of boulders rolling into a more upright position. "Wolfgang will put mighty muscles to work, and gather also!"

Wendy and Wes were standing up now, too. And now they were all looking at Wilson as if waiting for directions. Of course, he knew where the prairie was and they didn't.

"It's this- it's this way," he said, with a nervous catch in his words that he hoped was not going to become a recurring thing...

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With four people, the gathering went swiftly, and now each of them had their own grass supply and there was more in the chests besides, and everyone had their own roll on top of that. It had taken some roaming from the prairie into the adjacent meadows. Wilson should probably start working on a grass farm.

He lay curled on his side watching the fire- and the others. They were all arranged around it in a circle and could all see each other. He ought to be getting some sleep but he kept glancing at them to check- what, exactly, he wasn't sure. That they were comfortable? They were all comfortable, as far as he could tell; Wes curled up with his hands pillowed under his cheek and a serene expression, Wendy lying on her back with her hands folded over her chest and deathly still, Wolfgang sprawled out like a bear. Perhaps Wilson was anxious to reassure himself that they were all still there.

They were definitely there, he could hear them breathing. He told himself to close his eyes and stop staring at people.

The next thing he knew, the fire was getting low. Moving automatically and without really waking up, Wilson sat up, put another log into the pit, and lay back down.

Wolfgang was sitting up and shivering. Now Wilson was wide awake.

"Hey, something wrong, big guy?" he asked in hushed tones. Wes and Wendy were still sleeping. Wendy was making adorable little squeaky snores.

"Scary shadows!"

Wilson peered into the darkness. Indeed, he saw vaporous things moving and glancing in their direction. "So you see them too, eh?"

Wolfgang nodded and trembled.

"Can't your fists make mincemeat out of 'em?" Wilson asked.

"Cannot make mincemeat out of thing with no meat!"

"You have a point." English was clearly not Wolfgang's first language. Wilson wondered if perhaps the fellow didn't know he was speaking metaphorically, in which case 'make mincemeat out of' would be rather a silly thing to say. "But I'm certain those things have no chance against the World's Strongest Man."

"Is true. But is still scary."

Wilson nodded. A problem didn't have to be out of one's capacity to solve it, whether with fists or otherwise, to be fearful. Very true! "They recede further away the calmer you are," he said. "The best way to fight 'em is to get a good night's sleep. Use your strength up here." He tapped his temples. "Not down here." He tapped his upper arms, which, though toned from long survival, were like as unto toothpicks compared to Wolfgang's.

"Wolfgang headbutt?"

"No, no. What I mean is you've got to not let them bother you. Refuse to fear them. It's easier said than done, but you're the World's Strongest Man, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Then there you go." Wilson could not suppress a rather violent yawn. "I am not and I need all the help I can get. Good night, Wolfgang."

"Take good nap!"

Wilson flopped down on the roll. He kept one eye out for Wolfgang until he saw the large man lie down and go back to sleep himself.